

MARITIME INFORMATION-SHARING STRATEGY

A Realistic Approach for the American Continent and the Caribbean

Commander Alberto A. Soto, Chilean Navy

Information sharing is a fundamental requirement for meeting most of the current challenges of international maritime security. During the gathering of naval and maritime authorities at the nineteenth International Sea Power Symposium, held during October 2009 at the U.S. Naval War College, this topic captured the attention of most of the international representatives. It has become obvious that, together with globalization, the multiple threats and challenges of the maritime environment have assumed a transnational nature and require a coordinated effort to address them. It is difficult to argue against the ideas that these problems cannot be faced by any single state and

that multinational collaboration is mandatory if adequate maritime domain awareness (MDA) is to be achieved. The U.S. “Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower” recognizes these facts and consequently is “rapidly gaining worldwide currency.”¹ The American continent and Caribbean region do not seem to be an exception.

In this context the notion of a regional maritime partnership in the American continent and Caribbean demands effective information-sharing capabilities in order to become a reality. The objective of this article is to demonstrate that such an idea, although reasonable, seems to be too ambitious to implement in the regional context. Some of the potential partners

Commander Soto is currently serving as an international fellow at the U.S. Naval War College. He is a surface naval warfare officer, specializing in gunnery and missiles, with an engineering degree from the Chilean Naval Polytechnic Academy in weapons systems, as well as a master's in operations research from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. In 2005 he graduated first in his class from the Staff Course of the Chilean Naval War College. He has served on board a variety of combatant and logistic vessels of the Chilean Navy, including as commanding officer. He has been involved in such multinational exercises as UNITAS, TEAMWORK SOUTH, and the first PANAMAX (in 2003). In 1993 he served as a United Nations Naval Observer in Cambodia. He can be contacted at alberto.soto.ci@usnwc.edu.

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have differing or conflicting interests, in addition to the traditional challenges that any complex network faces. First, the article describes the concepts related to information sharing and discusses how the need is reflected in various levels of doctrine of the United States, the main actor and promoter of this initiative. Second, it demonstrates through the use of strategic concepts how difficult the varying goals and conflicting interests involved make the notion of implementing a strategic partnership in the American continent and Caribbean—so much so that the future existence of a robust information-sharing network at sea may be a utopian dream. Finally, before stating conclusions, the article presents pragmatic criteria for prioritizing regional countries' efforts in fulfilling the gaps in information-sharing capabilities.

PARTNERSHIP AND INFORMATION SHARING

The idea of global maritime partnerships has captured the attention of most nations that depend heavily on the sea for survival. Some have strongly supported it, but others have been skeptical about the real intentions of the United States.

The Need for Information Sharing

In Latin America and the Caribbean, distrust can be explained by historical reasons, the belief that the “new strategy may be seen as a contemporary revision of Mahan’s theory of naval power and a new form of American imperialism.”² It could also be argued, however, that the United States has no other viable option than to look for equal partnerships in Latin America—that if there was an era of U.S. hegemony in this part of the world, “that era is over.”³ In any case, it is difficult to argue that the current threats and challenges of the region (such as drugs, trafficking in weapons and humans, organized crime, illegal fishing, and natural disasters) are not transnational or that they do not require the coordinated effort of nations. Besides, there is a clear possibility that terrorists will use the sea to achieve their goals, with possibly devastating consequences. The threats were present before, but some of them became more evident after September 11, 2001. Given that traumatic event, the only reasonable response of states is to get involved, at least in some degree, in multilateral cooperation, in order to be considered part of the solution and not of the problem.

The strategic goal of this partnership is to maintain the safety and security of the world’s oceans for the use of every nation.⁴ One of the core elements of doing so is effective maritime domain awareness. Obviously, information sharing among countries is a basic requirement if MDA that can benefit those countries is to be developed. This article will use the U.S. Department of Defense definition of “information sharing”: “Making information available to participants (people, processes, or systems). IS [Information sharing] includes the cultural,

managerial, and technical behaviors by which one participant leverages information held or created by another participant.”⁵

This definition establishes a very ambitious framework, but several efforts in the Latin American region can be categorized as valuable information-sharing initiatives. Some of them started long before 9/11. For instance, in 1983 the Operative Network for Regional Co-operation among Maritime Authorities of the Americas (ROCRAM) was created. This organization is composed of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Cuba. One of its main objectives is “promoting the co-operation among the regional maritime authorities through the exchange of information and documentation.”⁶ It is notable that even Cuba—recognizing that it too shares the regional challenges in the maritime domain—is part of this organization.

In another context, the Caribbean nations and the United States signed on 22 March 2006 an Initiative to Combat Illicit Trafficking in Small Arms and Light Weapons, to address one of the main issues in that area. Again, one of the core objectives was to improve the sharing of information, specifically on entities and individuals involved in illicit trafficking and the maritime route that many of them use.⁷ Also, since 2007 the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) has conducted a multiyear program in the Caribbean, ENDURING FRIENDSHIP, to lay the groundwork for a regional security network of maritime patrols by providing seven nations with improved communications systems and high-speed interceptors.⁸

Since 2007, Chile has been hosting annual Western Hemisphere Maritime Domain Awareness Workshops. These events are organized by the Office of Naval Research Global Americas (ONRG Americas) and USSOUTHCOM, in conjunction with the director general of the Chilean Maritime Territory and Merchant Marine, in order to “facilitate a regional dialogue among Western Hemisphere nations to improve maritime information sharing.”⁹ Finally, a concrete example of cooperation in information sharing promoted by the United States is the Virtual Regional Maritime Traffic Center–Americas (VRMTC-Americas), which is an interagency and multinational demonstration project that proposes to leverage and integrate existing regional efforts that contribute to developing MDA.¹⁰

All these initiatives, as well as several others, aim in the right direction, but they have not yet generated regional capabilities effective enough to meet the threats that are being faced. Certainly, these threats often demand urgent reaction. At sea, the main tools are ships and aircraft, often of different nationalities—operating in conjunction, contributing their respective capabilities,

coordinating their decisions and actions, avoiding mutual interferences, and achieving efficient employment of resources. A network-centric-warfare capability, where every participant is included in a net of information, would be well suited to such an operational framework. Some argue, however, that those who fail to join the network would not be able to contribute effectively and would be relegated to the sidelines, left the most menial tasks and encouraged to stay out of the way or simply stay home.¹¹ The most developed nations should logically assume leading roles in solving this technological barrier in the regional context. Improvisation is not an option; permanent doctrines and plans are called for, which reflect this desire for integration and teamwork. If that is not the case, information-sharing initiatives will be fragile and easily lost among the priorities of every nation.

Information Sharing and Effects on Doctrine and Planning

The United States, the main promoter of information sharing, has recognized the importance of doctrine and planning tools to establishing effective partnerships with other states. Many documents, at different decision-making levels, have been issued.

At the presidential level, *Homeland Security Presidential Directive 13*, of 21 December 2004, recognizes that the “security of the maritime domain is a global issue.”¹² Additionally it indicates that integration of U.S. allies and international and private-sector partners must be enhanced in order to protect the nation’s interests in the maritime domain.¹³ The *National Strategy for Maritime Security* (September 2005), goes farther, stating that “full and complete national and international coordination, cooperation, and intelligence and information sharing among public and private entities are required to protect and secure the maritime domain.”¹⁴ In May 2007, the Department of Defense (DoD) published the *Department of Defense Information Sharing Strategy*. This document indicates that “trusted information *must* be made visible, accessible, and understandable to any authorized user in the Defense Department or to external partners except where limited by law or policy.”¹⁵ It also lays down that the mind-set must change from information “ownership” to “stewardship.”¹⁶

A DoD instruction of 2004 establishes procedures for implementing multinational information-sharing networks and directs combatant commanders to use the MNIS (multinational information sharing) CENTRIXS* network standard for networks that exchange classified DoD information, up to the Secret level, with foreign nations.¹⁷ Finally, the *United States Southern Command Strategy 2018*, in the context of securing the United States from threats, expands MNIS programs.¹⁸ These documents were not generated in a perfect logical sequence.

* Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System.

However, they clearly evidence a will to share information through all government decision-making levels and also with international partners.

Nevertheless, the fact that the United States or any other country wants to create a partnership for global and regional cooperation does not necessarily mean that other nations will respond with an urgency fitting the challenges to be faced. Understanding the fundamentals of constructing partnerships is useful for creating realistic expectations.

GOALS, INTERESTS, AND TOOLS: FOUNDATIONS FOR INFORMATION SHARING

Thucydides wrote that nations get involved in wars because of honor, interest, or fear.¹⁹ This ancient principle applies today for many regional countries in the sense that support for the maritime partnership promoted by the U.S. maritime strategy and for the international effort involved can be seen as a problem of honor and prestige.

Creating a Realistic Partnership

It is certainly reasonable that if a nation wants to be recognized as a constructive member of the international community, as being part of the solution of common maritime challenges, it ought to be involved to some degree in such initiatives. It would be the right thing to do, an option that is not difficult to defend, especially after 9/11. This explains the participation of 104 nations in the recent International Sea Power Symposium, the most ever. However, it should be clear that recognition and support of this idea does not necessarily imply real or important commitment; it is a long step to involvement of naval assets, personnel, materiel, and especially funding. In the American continent and Caribbean not every country has the capabilities required to make this step and, even more important, not every country necessarily feels that it is a real priority to do so. The idea that more powerful and developed countries must assume bigger responsibilities, in every sense, makes sense for many regional actors. However, the same stakeholders sometimes feel discriminated against and relegated to secondary roles, and they regularly demand greater influence in regional decisions. Any effort to establish a partnership in the American continent and Caribbean has to deal with this fact.

Second, participating in this idea of partnership is a matter of interest and common goals. It is difficult to deny that such problems as drug or human trafficking, illegal immigration, or terrorism must be faced by every country in the region, because the majority of them could be affected by the consequences of these threats. However, these common goals do not override the strongly held interests of individual nations, and this truth affects one of the foundations of

every possible partnership—the creation of trust. The American continent countries bring different and usually conflicting visions to bear upon specific issues.

Brazil, for instance, which is considered a key ally for the United States in certain economic areas, such as the ethanol industry, is also a clear exemplar of international cooperation in terms of information sharing in maritime security. The Brazilian maritime-domain-awareness system (SISTRAM) was recently integrated with one of the emblematic efforts in Europe, the Virtual Regional Maritime Traffic Center (VRMTC). In the global arena, Brazil is also considered a rising power, one that in recent years has shown a marked independence in international relations. In that field, however, some of its goals are in clear conflict with those of the United States. It is likely, for example, that the way Brazil is conducting its relationship with Iran does not meet the expectations of Washington. Whereas President Barack Obama's administration has firmly criticized Iran's nuclear program and its standing conflict with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the government of Brazil has "reiterated [its] support for Iran's right to develop its nuclear technology for use in energy production."²⁰ In the Honduran political crisis during 2009, Brazil declared that it would not recognize the election held in November 2009, but the United States did so, as the only viable exit to the impasse.²¹ Such decisions by Brazil and the United States are controversial for some states, but they reflect the political and strategic goals of these countries and should be fully respected. Similar examples of conflicts of goals among important countries in the region could be offered: Venezuela and Colombia, Chile and Perú, Brazil and Argentina, and some members of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM). But even respecting sovereign decisions does not prevent distrust among countries. Hesitation by countries to share information is understandable.

Therefore, it must be asked, how much information, and of what quality, would the countries of the American continent and Caribbean agree to share, bilaterally or multilaterally? Also, assuming a good level of partnership were obtained, how long would it last? Are these conflicts of goals and interests severe enough to break the trust among nations, the basic foundation of a partnership? How much risk are the countries willing to assume? Each country is a different case, and relations among nations are dynamic. Continual analysis is necessary if realistic expectations for sharing information among countries and navies are to be established.

Finally, though commitment in a regional partnership or alliance is a natural reaction to fear, as understood by Thucydides, not every country is affected to the same degree by fear regarding security issues in the maritime domain. For instance, not every country considers itself a potential target of terrorism, as the

United States may be. Terrorists can choose targets anywhere in the region, but the likelihood of being attacked or affected is greater for some countries than others. In the same way, gang problems are much more evident and grave in Central America than in the Southern Cone, and the effects of drug trafficking and related violence are much more apparent to Mexico and Colombia than they are to Ecuador or Uruguay. Consequently, it only makes sense that the commitment to a partnership of certain countries is less intense than that of others, with respect to different threats. Clausewitz recognized this problem: “One country may support another’s cause, but will never take it as seriously as it takes its own.”²²

Once the countries have understood why they should share information and of what quantity and quality, the next important question is *how* they should share it. In this region the disparity in available means for sharing information is evident and hard to solve. This is especially true at sea. However this fact does not necessarily mean that an adequate level of interoperability cannot be achieved.

Information Sharing at Sea: Leveraging the Technical Problem

The availability of a cooperatively created tactical picture has long been a “dream of naval commanders who wanted to be able to see what was over the horizon.”²³ This is the same end state that was imagined by Admiral Mullen when, as Chief of Naval Operations, he suggested a “thousand-ship navy” that would integrate the capabilities of the maritime services to create a fully interoperable force.²⁴ If every nation of the American continent and Caribbean accepted and became part of this initiative, the next main challenge would probably be technical. Regional navies have disparate capabilities, with major differences in terms of C4ISR.* Even the longest-standing U.S. allies do not acquire or develop command-and-control systems or surveillance and reconnaissance assets with the main goal of exchanging information with other potential allies. Most American continent and Caribbean countries are still focusing on becoming more integrated within their own armed forces or services. Many have second-hand equipment, which they transform or adapt on very limited budgets. As a consequence, an effective and common real-time tactical or operational picture is not available in most combined operations of regional navies. Few of these navies have access to such systems as Link 11, and the majority have only limited Internet protocol bandwidth capabilities, which would make possible e-mail, chat, FTP file sharing, and video teleconferencing. Considering that collaboration among the United States and its close European allies increasingly relies on such assets, the more extensive the interoperability among those allies gets,

* Command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

the deeper the gulf separating the United States from its American continent and Caribbean partners becomes.²⁵

But does this technological barrier imply that effective interoperability and information sharing are unachievable in the region? Certainly that is not the case. There have been combined naval operations among American countries for a long time, even without the U.S. Navy, and some of them have focused on maritime security issues. The INTEGRACION exercises between Chile and Argentina and FRATERNAL between Brazil and Argentina represent very important attempts to achieve interoperability in key areas. Experience shows that when Latin American countries need to share maritime information urgently, they always find ways. Even that requires detailed advance planning, but when that is done the information is shared by alternative methods quickly enough, even if not in “real time,” according to U.S. standards.

Among countries in the American continent and Caribbean region, information-sharing efforts are stimulated in situations where response is not “optional.” Maritime emergencies and environmental disasters fit that category, and in issues of that sort the lack of real-time networks has not been an impossible obstacle. Of course, better capabilities and tools are desirable; even without them, however, even if this objective is not quickly met, Latin American countries will be able to interoperate and exchange information to the degree they have been used to, at least among themselves. Meanwhile, until technological gaps are solved, if that ever happens, any country that becomes technologically advanced in information-sharing tools compared with potential regional partners should keep up its capabilities and training in current, less complex and sophisticated methods, and the employment of currently available regional tools must be optimized. This will allow the best possible interoperability with less-equipped partners that want to be involved in cooperative efforts, are the source of information, or are in the best position to respond.

However, asymmetries in capabilities create other problems. One of those is that before giving access to its own information, every country has the right to know how it will be protected by its partners. If legitimate questions to this end are not precisely answered, a natural reaction will be overclassification.

Information Disclosure and Overclassification

Any regional partnership or cooperative effort among nations has to deal with the fact that releasability policies are oriented to information security, not efficiency. Information disclosure is typically a tedious and complicated procedure;²⁶ this is especially the case if some members of a potential partnership are unable to demonstrate adequate ability to protect information released by others. There are also barriers created by internal commercial interests or by the

lack of trust among partners.²⁷ In the American continent and Caribbean area, several countries have failed to establish cooperation, for political or historical reasons. In many of these countries, overclassification could be seen as a cultural issue. Certainly, it is difficult to release what has always been treated as secret information, even when that categorization no longer reflects relations between two nations.

The obstacles generated by these problems are not easy to solve but need to be addressed among countries and also among stakeholders within every nation. With regard to internal obstacles, the United States has assumed this challenge and has implemented several initiatives that are good examples for regional partners. One of them is the Maritime Domain Awareness Data Sharing Community of Interest, developed in 2007. Mainly focused on technical solutions for sharing information among departments of the U.S. federal government, it also addresses “cultural” barriers between these entities and offers valuable guidance for developing agreements.²⁸

Additionally, the Defense Department has established the Information Sharing Implementation Plan. One of its purposes is to remove barriers created by improper classification.²⁹ In the case of the United States the main trigger of the initiative was the multilateral conviction that information sharing and collaboration are essential to mitigating the effects of catastrophic events, a conviction born of DoD’s difficulties in responding to Hurricane Katrina and 9/11. These reasons should be enough for the Latin American countries and the Caribbean as well. The search for mutual arrangements, either multilateral or bilateral, that break down barriers and overcome distrust could be considered a sign of regional maturity, responsibility, and commitment.

Certainly, developing tools for information sharing is a much faster process in a group of countries with a long history of commitment to common goals. Predictably, the United States has established its best partnerships with groups of countries that have unconditionally supported its policies and campaigns through its history. Latin America and the Caribbean do not seem to be in this group.

Are Latin American and Caribbean States in the Club?

It could be argued that the U.S. government is doing its best to develop satisfactory information sharing with its regional partners. For example, the U.S. Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) has established and funded a multinational information-sharing program that establishes CENTRIXS, Griffin, and CFBLnet as the main capabilities and services for information sharing among coalition partners and “communities of interest.”³⁰ Subsequently USSOUTHCOM has stated that it will expand such MNIS initiatives as

Participating Sharing Networks and CENTRIXS to facilitate information sharing and the development of information-sharing agreements utilizing technology in place.³¹ Such efforts suggest that regional criticism may be unfair.

However, several U.S. initiatives during recent years to explore new concepts and capabilities for multinational and interagency operations have excluded regional partners. One of these is the Multinational Experimentation series, led by U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM). These experiments have regularly involved many allied countries of Europe and Asia but unfortunately none in Latin America or the Caribbean region. Additionally, since 2002 the Technical Cooperation Program (involving Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States) has focused the efforts of its Maritime Systems Group (MSG) on “Networking Maritime Coalitions” and “FORCEnet and Coalitions Implications.” The MSG has become an important link among national naval C4ISR acquisition programs “so the nations can coevolve their systems in a way that will enable them to seamlessly network at sea.”³² In contrast, most (though not all) Latin American and Caribbean nations cannot yet make an effort like this. For that very reason, these nations should tenaciously strive to become involved in initiatives like the MSG, at least as observers. This would open a flow of information about new trends, tools, and technology to Latin American and Caribbean partners that want to participate or to assume a higher level of commitment in future regional or global initiatives.

A country that desires to be part of an initiative on information sharing should be rewarded for that attitude, as an example and incentive for other potential partners. This has been done before. For instance, during RIMPAC 2004, a special version of CENTRIXS was created, known as CENTRIXS-R. This system was developed specifically for this exercise to increase information-sharing capability for countries without access to the regular version (Chile and South Korea). For Chile, the result was an unprecedented success in interoperability in the exercise and, of course, increased desire within the Chilean Navy to be part of the “information-sharing club.”³³ It also set the standard for the Chilean Navy in future multinational operations. Certainly, a country that once tastes the advantages of the technology will make every effort to keep doing so. There is much more room for advancement in this area, and regionally there are very important gaps to fill. It will take a long time, and priorities should be established.

FILLING THE GAPS: CRITERIA FOR PRIORITIZING

There is much to do in increasing the quality of the information-sharing partnership in the American continent and Caribbean. In fact, the needs exceed the available resources. No miraculous results in regional initiatives should be expected. Even the members of this regional partnership with strong commitments to

advancing integration and overcoming distrust and political constraints are obliged to prioritize efforts and resources. The following basic criteria are suggested as part of the decision-making process of any particular country.

Level of Risk (Urgency). What potential partners are directly involved? If a country is the source, victim, or potential protagonist of a maritime security threat or challenge, it belongs to the “risk group” for that challenge or threat. For instance, Chile and Argentina see a real and urgent challenge in the South Pacific and South Atlantic and the Antarctic continent. Because of physical proximity, the Chilean and Argentine navies will regularly be the first to provide assets in case of a maritime emergency in that area, and accordingly they have formed a mutual commitment to the problem. This commitment was tested in the summer of 2007, when the MV *Explorer* sank in the Antarctic, forcing the rescue of 150 passengers and crew members. Ergo, Chile and Argentina belong to the same risk group for maritime emergencies in the South Pacific/South Atlantic/Antarctic area; they will necessarily be protagonists in these situations. Because there is a high likelihood that this sort of disaster will occur, effective and permanent information-sharing systems between Chile and Argentina make a lot of sense.

In counterdrug operations and counterterrorism, there are countries on the American continent that have an urgent need to cooperate, especially those that are on possible transit routes or are targets. In the face of such a grave vulnerability, efforts toward better information sharing must be persistent, even if the countries do not have strong political ties. Political concessions and a certain degree of tolerance must be accepted if the security of one’s country is threatened. Achieving an information-sharing partnership is a long-term effort that cannot depend on the government or administration that rules a particular country. This is especially so in the American continent and Caribbean.

A possible criterion for resource allocation could be the *expected value* of the threat in terms of the number of casualties. This implies assessment of the probability that the threat will become a fact, multiplied by its possible consequences measured as the number of casualties. Resources should be allocated to the threat with the highest expected value.

Likelihood of Success in an Agreement. Among the states that a country lists in its risk group, it should approach first those for which the efforts for obtaining agreements have a greater likelihood of immediate success. Let us suppose that country A has already identified countries B and C as in its risk group. If A has previously signed agreements with B but has political differences with C, it should give priority to B, where it is more likely to obtain a new agreement for improving information-sharing capabilities. That does not mean country A should stop attempting to integrate with C.

Bilateral versus Multilateral Agreements. Let us suppose that several countries have been categorized as in one's own risk group and a substantial likelihood of reaching successful agreements with them individually exists. Even then, negotiating a multilateral agreement may still be very difficult. In the American continent and Caribbean, although most agree that the maritime security goals and threats are broadly shared among countries, they do not appear to find that reason enough to achieve multilateral consensus agreements in information sharing, as it is for other issues. Interests, assets, conflicts, and ideologies are still difficult to overcome, and these factors are present in many multilateral organizations in the American continent and Caribbean. Some of these entities are severely criticized for lack of effectiveness in dealing with sensitive security issues. For instance, in 2009 the countries of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) could not reach multilateral consensus on a response to the new U.S. agreement with Colombia on military bases. The discussion inside that organization was highly politicized, and the agreement still divides opinion in the region.

Consequently with the three suggested criteria, information-sharing initiatives in the American continent and Caribbean should be promoted by first building potential blocs of countries that belong to the same risk groups. That would lead to planning and developing capabilities within groups of countries that need to work together. Then, inside each risk group, the agreements with higher likelihoods of success should be sought, ideally among sub-blocs of countries. If multilateral agreements inside sub-blocs involve assuming unreasonable risk, bilateral agreements should be sought without delay.

THE PRICE OF SECURITY

Information sharing is a key to increasing the likelihood of success against the challenges and threats facing the American continent and the Caribbean. However, achieving an adequate degree of multilateral cooperation will be a long-term effort. Distrust, technological gaps among nations, reluctance to disclose information, and overclassification are only some of the barriers to be overcome.

Despite important efforts that have been made to achieve a better level of information sharing and interoperability among regional nations, the resources available are not adequate for some of the most ambitious goals. It will probably be very difficult to achieve practical networking capabilities in the short term, especially at sea. A degree of realism is required to avoid frustration among regional partners, especially the less capable and developed. Constructive and

committed attitudes on the part of these nations should be always rewarded by the countries that lead the information-sharing effort.

Every regional partnership will have to deal with the fact that countries usually behave according to motivations of honor, interest, and fear. These factors affect countries in different ways. Considering the diversity of political and strategic goals, ideologies, and interests in the Americas and the Caribbean, it is very unlikely that a satisfactory information-sharing agreement that involves every country in the region will be achieved in the short term. Efforts and resources should be prioritized in order to advance in the direction desired and as threats evolve.

Despite the obstacles, no country should be completely left out of information-sharing efforts, because that nation could become the Achilles' heel of the region in terms of maritime security. Therefore, political differences should be seen as obstacles to be overcome, and divergent interests and concessions should be tolerated. That is part of the price that will have to be paid to defeat threats and guarantee the security of our nations.

The United States has a key role in leading the regional effort for information sharing. Most Latin American and Caribbean nations realize that they have to cooperate more than ever in order to achieve their goals and guarantee the security of their peoples. However, this cooperation and effort must be persistent and based on facts, not just words or documents, if they are to be credible. Trust is very difficult to develop, and it is very easy to destroy.

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